

The Script-based Approach: Early Oral Production in Language Teaching

By Lautaro I. Cáceres and Katica Obilinovic

A common misconception among many teachers of English as a foreign language is the belief that the current availability of attractive textbooks on the market makes the revision and design of teaching approaches entirely unnecessary. This idea is based on the assumption that the textbook is the method. However, a good textbook does not guarantee quality teaching, and the appropriate methodological approach can work miracles, even if the textbook used is poorly designed.

The Script-based Approach, what we call our new methodological proposal, is the result of a long and conscientious research endeavor to explore new avenues to make the process of learning a foreign language more effective and successful. This new approach offers a well-grounded, organized way to initiate language learners or true beginners to early oral production. The approach also seeks to help inexperienced language instructors who encounter numerous methods, which instead of creating "principled eclecticism" ends up causing confusion, particularly when training true beginners.

Early Oral Production

In comprehension methods (the Natural Approach and Total Physical Response), speech production is delayed until students' listening comprehension skill has been developed and they are ready to produce language. That this delay occurs in first language acquisition is a fact. Nevertheless, we see no valid reason to impose a silent period in a situation where the instructor works with large groups of students in very conservative classroom set-ups and in nonintensive language programs. Unnecessary delay in speech production opportunities for such students produces a less than favorable environment for fostering successful language acquisition.

Our approach promotes extensive listening activity as long as there is systematic and independent development of oral production. We are completely in favor of extensively exposing students to listening, but we also believe that listening alone does not suffice for the emergence of true speech, which in our view seems to require separate and special treatment.

The techniques incorporated in our approach are based on the idea of spoon-feeding the learner for intensive periods. We use semantically related lexicon and graded grammar in the form of monologs, which the instructor produces with the help of realia, visuals, and body language. Teachers interact with students by asking them *naming questions*, which elicit single-word utterances containing little or no syntax, and *definition questions*, which force learners to

produce basic syntactic arrangements previously explained through deduction and comparisons with the native language framework.

The type of interaction in our approach is guided by and consistent with the concept of negotiation that Ellis stated is necessary for language acquisition (Richard-Amato 1988). After the guided interaction, we integrate L1>L2 translation exercises, in which the cognitive and integrative aspects are crucial.

An Integrative View

Contrary to the audio-lingual practice of the 1960s, we promote teaching only a small portion of the total grammar that makes up the language, but a significant amount of semantically related vocabulary, presented in context. We believe pronunciation should be drilled in the context of the grammar, and vocabulary should be treated in an integrative fashion by reading aloud brief texts. This way the production of crucial processes, like weak forms, stress, and linking, is not unnecessarily delayed until the student is more advanced.

Our approach also includes indirect training in the skill of reading for comprehension, which we believe cannot be introduced through natural input at the beginning stages of foreign language learning. Natural language can only be presented as a supplement. Primarily, instructors need to create their own texts, which students can study not only for reading purposes but also for listening and oral production.

The teaching of reading comprehension cannot and should not be the sole activity of a language class. Children practice reading and learn how to read by actually reading. In fact, by the time they start their formal education, they have already internalized the basic structure of their language and have plenty of vocabulary. On the other hand, the recognition of ready-made chunks, suffixes, parts of speech, and syntax involves the direct teaching of grammar. So, reading cannot be isolated as if it has nothing to do with language.

The basic structure of this new Script-based Approach involves explicit learning, mainly deductive procedures, and extensive reference to the native language system. We do this through the use of *gradation* or graded input and the deductive presentation of rules.

Our approach is not less communicative than the approaches of those who advocate communication from the start, but it is, we think, more realistic. It is also in accord with today's foreign language teaching environment, which is characterized by large classes, limited exposure of students to the target language, and limited time devoted by most teachers to training. Our approach is more consistent with the view of Wilga Rivers (Arnold 1991), who points out that, still, after decades of trial-and-error procedures, we are left with two paths: that of presenting the rules (deduction) and that of having the students figure them out (induction). Rivers emphasizes the need for systematization and organization in the teaching and learning of grammar, which is exactly our aim.

We strongly believe that the context within which our approach makes sense is the traditional one of explicit learning. As Rivers points out, the deductive mode of presentation does not have

to be boring or tedious (Arnold 1991). After all, teaching is a science and an art. Grammar, for example, can be offered in a way that it is palatable, learnable, and teachable. To do this, we advocate a truly didactic presentation through a constant comparison with the native language system. Although learners intuitively know their own language system, they are not aware of it. Making them conscious of their system so they can apply it to learning another language requires scientific analysis and the art of simplicity.

An Artificial Procedure: The Need for Automatization

After we give the grammatical explanations, learners may understand the linguistic data presented, but they lack the ability to apply those rules automatically. To help bridge this gap, we advocate procedures that incorporate extensive use of drills into what is basically a cognitively oriented approach. The incorporation of drill work does not make the approach a behavioral/audio-lingual method; rather, it rescues what was unnecessarily and perhaps intuitively eliminated from our language classrooms. The drill work that we recommend can be challenging and stimulating. (See Appendix below.)

Other researchers support the need for a certain degree of automatization through systematic mechanical practice, especially of routines or ready-made chunks, because this procedure contributes to the development of fluency (Larsen-Freeman 1987).

We strongly believe that drill work and the use of ready-made chunks at the beginning of the learning process—although totally artificial—help provide beginners with the language fundamentals they so desperately need.

An Artificial Beginning

Our approach fuses several procedures: (a) gradation, (b) deductive presentation of rules, (c) early production through an independent treatment of guided interaction, (d) semantically related vocabulary, (e) reference to the native language system, and (f) L1>L2 translation. To these we add drilling and ready-made chunks for imitation.

The novelty of the Script-based Approach, however, lies in the merging and overall organization of the steps and the gradual and systematic construction of basic oral proficiency via artificial means. Natural language, we believe, will later flow spontaneously once the foundations are laid.

Meaningful Learning

As Ausubel (1968) has indicated, both rote learning and meaningful learning have important roles to play when students learn new information. Language learning certainly involves both.

In the Script-based Approach we promote memorizing ready-made chunks at early stages, when imitation plays a significant role. At the same time, the learner gets involved in meaningful learning because there is constant reference to how the target language and native language systems work. We emphasize that, in the case of foreign language learners, the only cognitive structures present are those related to the native tongue. Because students may not be conscious of these structures, the instructor must make the students aware of how the native language

system operates, and relate its functions to that of the target language system. Teachers must constantly check the learners' comprehension (how these rules work) and their development of active syntax through questions and translation exercises. Both the grammar and the vocabulary are presented in various contexts.

Paraphrasing

Another controversy has been whether the vocabulary should be presented only via paraphrasing, thereby totally excluding the mother tongue, or whether the native language should be used occasionally as a shortcut to comprehension.

This dilemma, we feel, cannot be solved by adopting an either/or mentality. If a given concept is very complex when paraphrased, reverting to the learner's native language saves time, which could be used to practice in the target language. Nevertheless, we remain convinced that the continuous use of paraphrasing to convey meanings in various contexts is essential. Paraphrasing a concept once may be sufficient when comprehension is the only aim. However, paraphrasing contributes to much more than clarifying concepts; it exposes learners to various ways in which new words can be used through a variety of syntactic arrangements and semantic contexts.

Expository Teaching Versus Problem Solving

In the Script-based Approach, we do not separate expository teaching (deductive, receptive) teaching from problem-solving (inductive, discover) teaching. Learners need to be told how the language works so that during training they can find solutions to language conflicts by interpreting texts using the new rules. Thus, expository teaching works hand-in-hand with problem solving.

Likewise, we include other foreign language techniques and activities to develop skills. For example, instructors are encouraged to integrate aspects of the Series Method designed by Gouin with Total Physical Response to practice vocabulary, and the Natural Approach for communicative activities, to reinforce the structure of our Script-based Approach. However, we do not view these methodologies as appropriate for beginners, but more as practice strategies. Unlike those who believe that communication can be achieved through communicative activities, we posit a different formula: communication needs to be developed gradually in a step by-step progression, and fluency is achieved little by little. Teachers need to build the scaffolding that will make fluency possible, and we contend that this can be accomplished through artificial means unlike first language acquisition.

Teaching Grammar

In this approach, we have stressed these rules on teaching grammar:

1. Grammar should be presented gradually in a step-by-step progression.
2. Reference to the students' native language should be used to establish the right connections.

3. Teachers should not adopt the perspective of a linguist or grammarian who is describing language scientifically, but rather that of a foreign language instructor who is addressing an audience that lacks formal knowledge and control of how the target language works and control in using it.
4. Grammatical explanations should be short, clear, and concise. A deductive mode of presentation should be used when the grammar is complex or difficult, and an inductive mode of expression should be used when grammar is fairly simple.
5. Understanding explanations is essential in a cognitively oriented method; however, understanding alone is not enough. Therefore, using mechanical and meaningful exercises is essential.

Conclusion

This article has presented the theoretical foundations and the overall organization of a new methodological approach to language teaching, based on research and extensive classroom observation and experience. What motivated us to develop this new approach was the prevailing methodological diversity which encouraged principled eclecticism, and caused confusion, especially when teaching true beginners.

We have stressed that our proposal is cognitively oriented. We believe that the formal, explicit teaching of rules may be appropriate when the essential conditions for language acquisition are not met. We expect our students to become competent communicators, but we are convinced that a purely communicative phase is unrealistic and impracticable in a foreign language setting unless mechanical and meaningful practice is used. Furthermore, we strongly believe that an extensive period of artificial procedures, like those we suggest, is indispensable for the success of training in manipulating that which learners have already internalized.

Finally the aim of our proposal is to help the foreign language teacher transform a monolingual speaker into an individual who can use the basic grammatical system of the target language and its everyday vocabulary with ease and spontaneity, as well as one whose pronunciation is accurate.

References

- Arnold, J. 1991. Reflections on language learning and teaching. An interview with Wilga Rivers. *English Teaching Forum*, 29, 1, pp. 2–5.
- Ausubel, D. 1968. *Educational psychology: A cognitive view*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Larsen-Freeman, D. 1987. From unity to diversity: Twenty-five years of language teaching methodology." *English Teaching Forum*, 25, 4, pp. 2–10.

Obilinovic, K., L. Cáceres, and V. Frias. 1996. *Métodos para novicios: Resultados e implicancias de estudio experimental, actas del X encuentro SONAPLES (Sociedad Nacional de Profesores de Lenguas Extranjeras en la Enseñanza Superior)*. Universidad Arturo Prat, Iquique, Chile.

———. 1998. *The Script-Based Approach: Theory to Practice*. Universidad Arturo Prat, Iquique, Chile.

Richard-Amato, P. 1988. The classroom as an environment for language acquisition. In *Making it happen*. New York: Longman.

Lautaro I. Cáceres teaches English as a foreign language at Universidad Católica del Norte, Antofagasta, and Universidad Arturo Prat, Iquique, Chile.

Katica Obilinovic teaches in the English Department at Universidad Metropolitana de ciencias de la Educación, Santiago, Chile.

APPENDIX

Structure of the Script-based Approach (independent development of basic oral production in true beginners)

PART I

A. LEXICON

New lexical items are illustrated at least five or six times by paraphrasing them in various contexts, followed by comprehension questions. This technique provides the learner with brief texts or scripts showing alternative syntactic combinations.

B. GRAMMAR

The rule(s) and the reference to the rules are explained by referring to the native language system. (This requires presentation of the data through deductive procedures followed by a mechanization stage, such as drill work.)

C. STRUCTURED PRACTICE

Questions and answers incorporate the lexicon and grammar previously

explained and illustrated. These help generate language.

D. BRIEF TEXTS FOR READING COMPREHENSION

Texts are read silently, and the reading is followed by comprehension questions.

E. READING ALOUD

This is a drill to practice pronunciation in context.

PART 2

A. MONOLOGS

Monologs are similar to Step IA, but differ in the length of texts. Monologs provide students with additional opportunity to understand new meanings and observe how the lexicon and new grammar behave in context.

B. INSTRUCTOR/STUDENT INTERACTION

1. Naming questions: These are questions requiring one-word responses.
2. Definition questions: These are questions whose answers require syntactic arrangements (true oral production).
3. LI>L2 translation: This activity is purely integrative.